Stolen Happiness — By Barry Pain

THE waiter placed before young Mr. Haynes a plate on which were a few bones, an eye-ball and a piece of black mackintosh.

"Turbot, sir," said the waiter, in an explanatory voice.

It was a hotel dinner in an English cathedral city, and faithful to its type. The green venetian blinds were drawn down, and the incandescent gas was shaded with pink paper. The walls were covered with a material that is supposed to simulate Jacobean oak panelling; it may be acquitted of any actual deceit.

The room was full, and at the small tables were many of those middle-aged or aged women that seem to haunt the provincial hotels of this country. They are a class by themselves. They wear brown skirts and a totally different blouse in the evening, and grandmamma has a grey woolen shawl. They speak in whispers and peck patiently any odds and ends that the waiter gives them. They have an air of defective vitality and chronic discontent. They nearly all suffer from catarrh and use eucalyptus on their handkerchiefs.

Observe, too, their surreptitiousness. When the elderly lady, hand to mouth and eyes glazed with terror, has given the waiter an order, so hushed as to be almost inaudible, and then proceeds to build up a screen at her right hand with the wine-list and cruet-stand, you may be pretty certain that there will presently be a little weak whiskey-and-soda on the far side of the entanglement.

There were two waiters in the room. The elder of them was English, had been there for years, and under the favorable influence of a cathedral atmosphere had already grown much of the manner and appearance of an arch-deacon. The younger, a sad-eyed Italian of eighteen, had only been at the hotel two months, but he looked every inch an acolyte.

It was the archdeacon who had placed that plate of alleged turbot before young Maurice Haynes.

"Turbot, is it?" said Mr. Haynes. "Interesting relic. Now take it back to the cat again and bring me something to eat."

Suddenly from the little table next to him came a wild burst of laughter. It broke out like a discharge of steam from a locomotive. It bubbled with pure joy. It stopped abruptly and then started again uncontrollably. It broke up all the holy calm of that table d'hote.

Withered virgins of fifty turned round to look at this laughing girl, some with a sniff of disapproval, others compelled to a wan, responsive smile. The archdeacon-waiter seemed pained. The acolyte was proceeding with his work with apparent calm, when suddenly the laughter-infection smote him full in the midriff. He dropped a helping of cabinet pudding, put a hand over his mouth, bolted into the passage, slapped his leg, exploded, and was asked what the devil he thought he was doing. In the dining-room the girl still laughed at intervals.

"Control yourself, I beg," said her flustered German governess. "It is hysteria. Hosh! hosh! Ruhig! Celia! It is so rude."

Celia shook her head.

"Can't help it, Fraulein," she gasped. "Anything about a cat makes me laugh."

And she relapsed again.

Maurice Haynes had not had the faintest intention of being amusing. It was out of the bitterness of his soul that he had spoken. He had already declined to believe that over-diluted meat-extract with some armorial bearing in stamped carrot constituted Julienne soup. This supposed turbot was more than he could endure.

He was an artist, a real creative one, and he had been travelling all day; on the morrow he was to begin the presentation portrait of a scholarly canon with a fine head; now, if ever, dinner was a positive necessity. He sent for the manageress.

The manageress was all black satin and superciliousness when she arrived, but only the black satin was left by the time Haynes had finished with her. He was under the impression that he was being merely firm; but it seems to me that when you tell the manageress of the principal hotel in a cathedral city that she is not fit to cater for a troop of performing fleas, you go beyond firmness.

At any rate, he was effectual. He received immediately more turbot than had ever been given to one man at one time since the foundation of the hotel. His helping from the joint was such that he was almost (but not quite) ashamed to demand a second. And the omelette aux fines herbes, which came as a peace-offering at the end of the repast, was exclusive matter for M. Haynes, Esq., only, and not in the contract.

His sunny temper returned. He consulted affably with the head waiter on the grave question of port. And now, for the first time, he turned his head to see who the cheeky kid was who had laughed at his righteous indignation.

He saw a tall girl of fifteen with an elderly governess. The governess was peeling walnuts, and the girl was eating them; this seemed to argue devotion on the part of the governess. The girl had an Irish beauty of dark hair and blue eyes, and her face followed her every thought with marvellous expressiveness. The mouth was sweet and sensitive. Haynes thought she had lovely color, but would be the devil to paint.

One lightning glance showed her that he was looking at her; she flushed slightly, knowing that she had been really too awful, but she also smiled, because she remembered the cat.

"Nice kid," thought Haynes.

When she had gone, the effect was much as if the incandescent gas had been lowered. There was no longer any young vitality in the room, nothing but a few groups of elderly grey women over their walnuts — pecking, cracking, mumbling, sniffing.

"Waiter," said Haynes to the acolyte, "take my port into the smoking-room."

The smoking-room was equally depressing. It seemed to be furnished principally with spittoons and advertisements of auction sales, and an aged smell of bad beer hovered over it. Haynes endured it for the length of two cigarettes, and then his eye caught, framed on the wall, that successful Christmas-number plate, "Won't 'Oo Kiss Doggie?" Haynes groaned and fled.

The room he next tried was the drawing-room, and to prevent any possibility of mistake its name had been painted on the door. Here the furniture was more ambitious, and a long-tailed piano stood open. The room was empty, and only one gas jet had been lit. Haynes ran one hand over the key board, and was surprised to find that the instrument was in tune.

He sat down, and began modulating idly from one key into another, as his thoughts wandered. Presently he began to play a waltz of Chopin's, all passion and incense. He did not hear the door open and close. It was only as he played the last notes that he found he now had an audience.

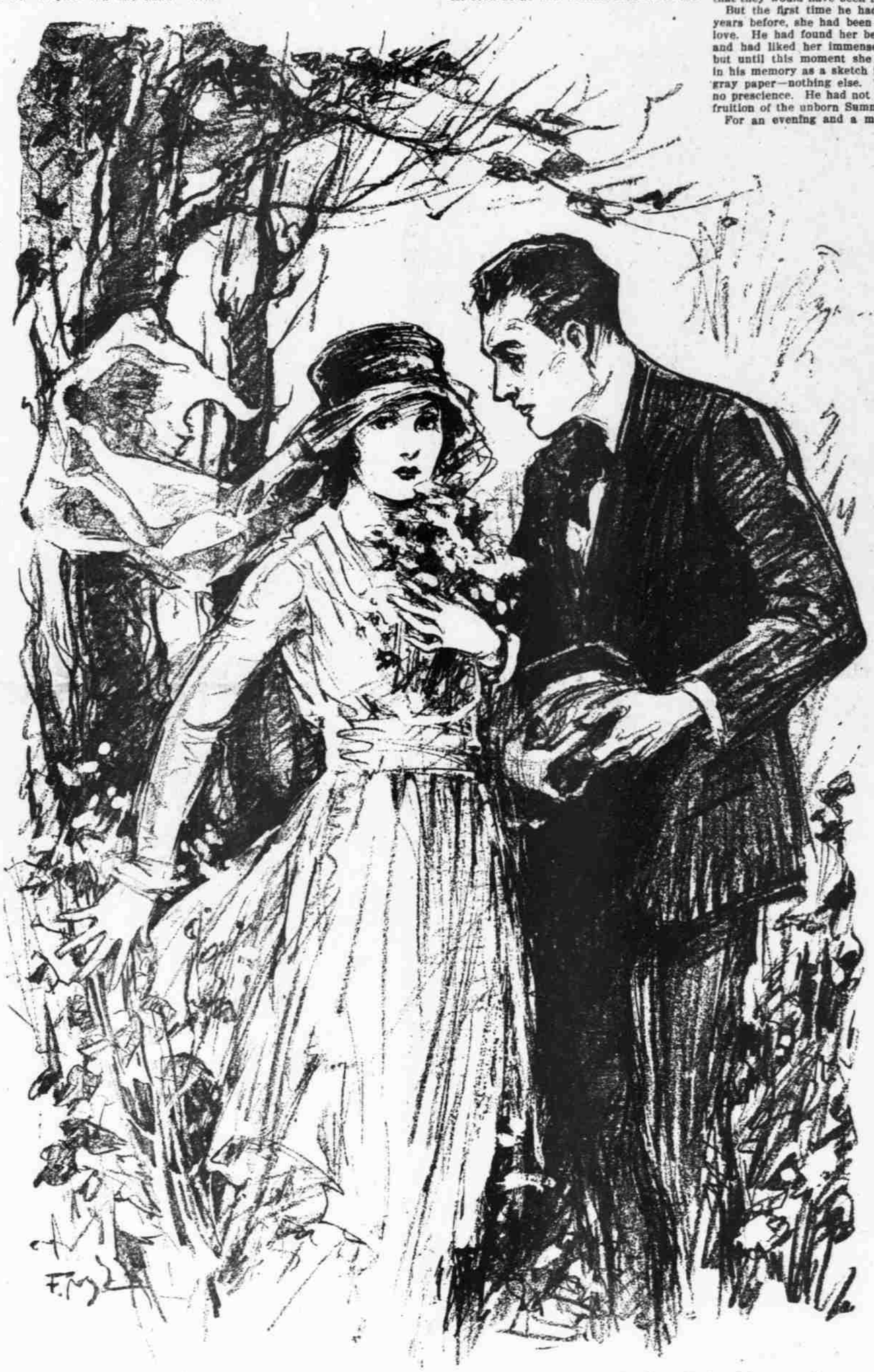
There were two old ladies with their knitting. There was a German governess engaged on a beadwork cover for a spectacle case. And there was Celia, quite serious now, and with excited eyes, coming straight toward him.

"It was too lovely," she cried. "I wish you could have gone on for ever." She held out her hand to him. "Thank you, thank you!"

Now, more than ever, did consternation fall upon Fraulein. She lived in a perpetual state of terror as to what Celia would do next, and Celia always did it. She was full now of incoherent reproof to Celia and apologies to Haynes. "She is zo imbolsive."

Haynes rose from the piano laughing. "Oh, please don't mind," he said, in German. "I am delighted that my poor music pleases somebody."

If he had really told her in English not to mind, and that he was glad his silly music had pleased them, he would have made much less impression. In the eyes of Fraulein, the fact that he spoke her native tongue consecrated him; and Celia sat up till nearly eleven that night, and went to bed filled with music and adoration.



"What is the good of pretending any more?" he said, in a low voice. "You know perfectly well that I love you."

Next morning Haynes was precisely an hour late for his appointment with the scholarly canon with the fine head. His story in excuse about a missing tube of color was plausible and fairly amusing, but had no foundation in fact. He had spent that hour in making two rapid drawings of Celia—effective things in sanguine on gray paper. And then Celia and her governess had departed in continuance of a holiday tour to places of historical and educational interest.

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At the end of ten years, on a late afternoon in June, Maurice Haynes came back to that hotel again. London had become suddenly intolerable to him. He was tired of his work, and he was still more tired of his play, if the wearying social functions that befall the fashionable portrait-painter are to be called play. He wanted to fly away and be at rest.

If he had not the wings of a dove, he had, at any rate, a good motor-car, and he drove it himself. He had no particular destination in view when he started; he had driven a hundred miles before he decided that he might as well stop at the old cathedral city that night.

He found little change at the hotel. The same black satin manageress still extended turbots beyond their natural limit; but the archidiaconal waiter had increased in girth and in stateliness of movement, and had a new acolyte—the sad-eyed Italian had given place to a straw-colored German.

Maurice Haynes dined well, having taken precautionary measures to that end. As soon as he had recalled himself to the memory of the manageress, she had recognized that this was not an occasion for trifling.

But it seemed that other visitors were not being so well treated. From a little table behind him Haynes heard much grumbling in a querulous man's voice. "Food not fit for a cat," was one phrase he caught. A woman answered briefly, in a low and gentle voice, and Haynes, without hearing what she said, was conscious that she was being bored intolerably.

Haynes looked round.

The woman sat with her back to Haynes. She wore a black lace tea-gown, and leaned back in her chair. The man opposite to her was about fifty years of age, and of unprepossessing appearance. He had that thing which is hardly ever seen, except on the stage—a red nose. He had also a mean mouth, and a most abominable and Shakespearean expanse of forehead.

It was only as these two people passed out of the room that Haynes caught a glimpse of the woman's face, and recognized that this was Celia. This was the laughing girl that he had met ten years before. The man was evidently her husband. She was very beautiful, as she had promised to be, but the expression on her face was very sad. It is a long way from fifteen to twenty-five, and many changes befall in that decade.

It was to him something more than an impressive coincidence. Suddenly this highly successful artist saw his life as a failure. He was convinced that he should have married Celia, and he was convinced that they would have been happy.

But the first time he had met her, ten years before, she had been too young for love. He had found her beauty adorable, and had liked her immensely as a child, but until this moment she had remained in his memory as a sketch in sanguine on gray paper—nothing else. He had shown no prescience. He had not guessed at the fruition of the unborn Summers.

For an evening and a morning he had seen her, and then had allowed the clue of her life to slip out of his hands. And now chance mocked him once more with the sight of her—now that she was married to that miserable little man with the red nose and plaintive voice, now that she was unhappy, now that it was too late.

Yet, though it was too late, he now went into the drawing-room and began to play the same music that he had played ten years before. He felt certain that if she heard it it would bring her to him. He was not mistaken.

She paused for a moment in the open doorway, and then come toward him, smiling and self-possessed.

"I did not know you were staying in the hotel," she said, and then added quickly, "You do remember me, don't you?"

"Yes, Celia," he said as he shook hands with her. "I remember you very well. I caught a glimpse of you as you were going out of the dining-room, and I recognized you at once. I was wondering if you would remember this." His hands on the piano repeated a phrase of the music.

"Of course I remember it. But I am not Celia any more. I am Mrs. Owen."

"Oh, no," said Haynes, laughing. "When one has called the child by her Christian name, one calls the woman by her Christian name. I shall certainly call you Celia."

"You can if you like."

"Now tell me all about it."

"All about what?"

"All about the last ten years of your life."

"What is there to tell? I have done nothing. I was married when I was eighteen. Since then I have gone on existing. Now you, on the contrary, have had a splendid"——

"Have you got any children, Celia?" he asked suddenly.

She shook her head. "Perhaps it is as well," she said drearily. "I don't think my husband would like children. He is an archaeologist, you know. That is why we are here. He is making rubbings of brasses in the cathedral. He has a great collection of them, all beautifully catalogued."

"How perfectly horrible," said Haynes with conviction.

For the first time she laughed.

"So you still laugh sometimes," he said.

"Not very often now. But I remember what you mean. I believe I behaved abominably. I overheard something you said about a cat. It was your own private joke, and I did not know you, and had no right to laugh at it. I don't know why, but jokes about cats specially appealed to me then. Now I don't think cats are any more amusing than anything else, do you?"

"Yes—no—I don't know. Are you happy, Celia?"

"I knew you were going to ask that."

"Well, are you?"

"Oh, of course I am. Perfectly."

And by way of proving it she added, with a sob in her voice, that she must go, that Harry would wonder where she was. He let her go.

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At breakfast next morning Mr. Maurice Haynes very deliberately introduced himself to Mr. Henry Owen. Celia was not yet down.

Mr. Owen was pleased to be very gracious. He said that Celia had told him about Mr. Haynes, and that it was a pleasure to meet so distinguished an artist. "You gave my wife a little sketch you made of her when she was a girl, I think?"

"I did."

"Well, I did a silly thing about that. It was soon after our marriage. A friend of mine came along and offered me a fiver for it, and I took it."

"I see. And your wife didn't like it?"

"Oh, she was angry enough; but that's not what I mean. If I had only known then that you were the coming man, I would never have sold that sketch for a fiver. What would it be worth now?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Haynes; "it would depend upon how much anyone wanted it."

In the course of conversation Haynes learned a good deal about Mr. Owen, who was a gentleman without reticence. He explained, for instance, that the redness of his nose was due entirely to dyspepsia, and not to intemperance. He was rather pathetic about it, posing as one misunderstood by the world. He entered into the question of dyspepsia generally, with more detail than seemed to Haynes to be absolutely requisite. Haynes changed the subject.

"I wonder if you would care to come out in my car this morning?" he said—"you and Mrs. Owen, of course. It's rather a jolly morning, and I've got nothing to do. I would be glad to drive you anywhere."

"Not for me, thanks. I have my work to do at the cathedral. Take my wife for a drive, by all means."

"Thanks, I will. She will be down directly?"

"Yes; I'll send her to you. She has got the bad habit of keeping awake all night, and sleeping in the morning. A great mistake. I'm always telling her about it."

An hour later Haynes, with Celia by his side, drove out from the cathedral city.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

"To the world's end," she said fantastically, laughing. She was in strangely high spirits this morning.

A mile further on he stopped the car. They got down and he picked her the wild roses that she wanted. As he gave them to her, he said in a low voice, "What is the good of pretending any more? You know perfectly well that I love you."

"Yes."

"You love me, too?" She bowed her head. "Then you are not going back to him? You will come with me?"

"To the world's end," she whispered.

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It was quite late that afternoon when she suddenly and irrevocably changed her mind. "I must go back," she said. "This is all very beautiful, but it is like my wild roses—it falls to pieces. There is no romance left. The sordid legal business always ends it. Besides, it is stolen happiness. I must not have it. I have had a day of life, and I can go on living for a while on the memory of it. You come to me too late, Maurice."

It was in vain that he pleaded with her. She admitted that she did not know whether it was conscience or cowardice, but she was none the less resolved. An hour later they were back at the hotel.

At Mr. Owen's suggestion, Maurice dined at their table that night. Mr. Owen had secured a valuable addition to his collection, and was feeling pleased with himself and the world. He rallied his wife cheerfully on her want of appetite.

"That's it," he continued. "She has no appetite, but has a perfect digestion. I have a magnificent appetite, but I always have to pay for it afterward. Seems ironical, doesn't it?"

And suddenly Celia burst into uncontrollable, almost hysterical, and quite mirthless laughter. That laugh haunted Haynes at times for the rest of his life.